Letter from Taizé

Preparing for the Council of Youth

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The Prior of Taizé writes :

Here in Taizé, with the Council of Youth in mind, we have taken many risks, but I cannot bring myself to worry when people put their finger on the ponderous difficulties. Why ? Quite simply because I have confidence in the intuitions of the young people from so many countries who meet here, who go off again, who are searching, who pray, and who come back again. Certain warm nights in August, with thousands of young people staying on the hill, I chanced to be out walking alone, under a sky heavy with stars. And I told myself : the multitude of intuitions of these young people glimmers like streaks of fire in my night. For the present, there is nothing that can be readily perceived, and yet my night is festival, it is ablaze, heavy with a reckless hope. The future and the young people ; they are one. No, I have no fear for the future. A springtime of the Church awaits us. Soon it will warm us with its fire.

Roger, your brother.

A WEEK IN TAIZÉ

At the end of August, some young folk, back from Africa, wrote to their friends in the Cameroun and the Congo :

« He we are in Taizé. We have been back for just over a month, living in the midst of a great crowd of young people who come here during their vacation for weekly meetings of discussion, prayer and festival. It is rather like what we experienced last Easter at Yaoundé. Each week throughout the month of August there has been between 1000 and 1700 young people.

» During our stay in Kinshasa, we discovered something that we were able to understand for the very first time : preparing for the Council of Youth does not mean doing enormous things nor above all expecting rapid, fantastic results. What we grasped was the sheer necessity for believing that what one is seriously living and doing will one day bear fruit. And this fruit will be quite simple, but very beautiful : like friendship, the festival of being together, the joy of thinking and working together. Before the harvest can come, however, we must sow, and during this time there is nothing to be seen. »

Throughout 1971, 42,000 young people from 75 countries have met in Taizé. The searching in these meetings is based on the four sentences that made up the « joyful news » announced at Easter 1970 :

« The Risen Christ comes to quicken a festival in the innermost heart of man. He is preparing a springtime of the Church : a Church devoid of means of power, ready to share with all, a place of visible communion for all humanity. He is going to give us enough imagination and courage to open up a path of reconciliation. He is going to prepare us to give our life so that man be no longer victim of man. »

The meetings are built up around three main elements : the community prayer, morning, noon and evening ; small groups of seven people, which make possible a personal encounter ; the tents, workshops meeting three times a week, in much larger numbers, for research into a variety of definite and specific ways of giving one's life

The fifteen to twenty workshops held each week became necessary this year so that the great diversity among those who come to Taizé be taken into account. The workshops mean that throughout the week each person can pursue the line of research which corresponds most closely to his own particular aspirations. If he is looking for silence, he can make use of the « silent field ». If he is concerned about political involvement, he can choose between the tent on « combat and reconciliation ». or that on « search into politics », or else, « education and conscientisation ». If he wants to think about the Church and faith, there is a series of tents to choose from : « prayer and silence », « Bible study », « resurrection », « life-commitment in the Church », « research into the Church ». There is a tent given over to music and movement, another to design. Finally, tents dealing with practical questions of living : « faith and profession life », « understanding between Christian and non-christian », « reciprocity between the continents ».

Each morning, there is a short general meeting for everyone, held in the Church, during which, among other items, news is given of current affairs.

Evenings are taken up with different activities.
A bonfire in the « crater », open discussion groups, or a great festival made up of various kinds of spectacle and entertainment :

from the balcony of the Yellow House, lit up with candles : a trio, bassoon, oboe and clarinette, is giving a concert. The performers are three young men from Limoges, France, taking part in the meeting.

This number of the *Letter from Taizé* has a circulation of 86,000 and is published in five languages.

In the crater : a performance, using drama, dance and music to express this year's theme, prepared and presented by a group from London, England.

In different tents : guitar music, mime, poetry, singing.

Another evening, there is an organ concert in the church, or a recital given by a choir from the district. Or again, a great festive meal, candlelit, on the courtyard in front of the Yellow House.

Twice during the week, people have a chance of meeting Brother Roger. One evening, after prayers, he talks about world events, as well as events in Taizé itself, that have struck him during the week. On Sunday morning, after Eucharist, he is back in church to exchange a few words with people individually, to call the benediction on those who wish it, so that « *each one may be known by his name* ».

By week's end, after so much discussion, listening, prayer, heads and hearts are full of ideas and impressions to be followed up. Friday comes as a « day of silence and retreat » so that people have time to think things out personally and prepare themselves for continuing the search on their return home.

Every day, brothers of the community and priests are available in the church for personal counselling and confession for those who wish them. The need to be known personally and to go far in the questioning of one's own life, with the help of another person, which made itself felt at Easter, has farther increased through recent months. The « interior adventure » is something discreet and hidden, but at the same time so strong that it expresses itself through gestures and commitments. « *Perhaps it is only now that we understand the reason for the insistance on exploration, getting down to the source, the Risen Christ and the festival he comes to quicken in the innermost heart of man.* »

Every Saturday evening, there begins a night of uninterrupted prayer that goes on till Sunday morning.

A host of different events brings in a special note to each meeting. The presence, through several weeks, of Dom Luis Fernandes, auxiliary bishop of Vitoria, Brazil. The visit of Bishop Stanislas from Burundi. The striking thing is their simplicity and their availability to everyone. « *Being able to meet and talk with these men, so anxious to understand my own concerns and those of our time, so capable of radical questioning, has opened up a new perspective for me on my relation with the institutional church.* »

12 - 18 July : an English language week. An English participant writes : « *To have the first ever week with English as the main language meant that the young Christian movement abroad does recognise that part of the English speaking Church takes seriously the contemporary search for deeper spirituality.* »

Nearly a hundred Americans have come by charter flight from New York. Whites, blacks, Porto-Ricans and Chicanos ; many are from Chicago ghettos and from Alabama. The Chicago group have spent much time in preparing their trip : « *We were working together. We washed many cars for one dollar each. We sold many cases of candy. People, to whom we are very grateful, saw the importance of this experience and gave their prayers, money and time to make this possible* ». « *The first step in preparation for our journey was to meet regularly. We did a complete orientation during the spring months. We discussed important topics. We invited other people in to begin the experience of exchanging ideas* ». At week's end, they broke into song as only they can : « *Thanks for taking me in. Thanks for letting me be your friend.* »

Travelling, making fraternal visits to one another, formed an important part in the life of the early church. This ancient custom is lived intensively : Giuseppe Roncalli, brother of Pope John XXIII, spent three days

in Taizé ; the presence of so many young folk who have journeyed thousands of miles to get here brings nearer the combat and the human riches of their continents : Ed from Chicago, U.S.A., Moïz from Bombay, India, Sépé from Oceania, as well as others from Asia, Africa and South America : some of them will stay on in Europe for several months as a sign of reciprocity ; visits, too, from bishops, cardinals, and, on two occasions, from the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches.

In the other direction, teams of youth leave for Madagascar, and India, as well as for European countries from which people are unable to make the trip to Taizé. Arrivals and departures go on throughout the summer and news of them filters round the camp.

August 6, Feast of the Transfiguration : the Office is celebrated under the night sky on the courtyard of the church. As the light of the Risen Christ transfigures our human darkness, the obscurity of the courtyard is lit up by a multitude of flickering lights from the candles. The joy of light in darkness is expressed in the distribution of flowers and the sharing of « brioches », and the « fête » goes on, late into the night.

« *Giving one's life, the whole of one's life, throughout one's entire existence* » : the phrase finds its full signification in the life profession of one of the brothers, on 15 August.

Ideas for the reception in Taizé

What ways could we imagine for creating a more fraternel reception for those who spend only a short time in Taizé, young and old alike ? Could ways be found of making it possible for everyone to share food and drink, in a very simple style, without having to pay ? Are there any young bakers who could spend some time in Taizé, baking bread of different sorts in an oven to be constructed near the bells ?

GIVING OUR LIFE SO THAT MAN BE NO LONGER VICTIM OF MAN

In preparing for the Council of Youth, first and foremost we are preparing ourselves. This is a task that takes place above all within oneself : an interior adventure. During the meetings, based on questions put by Margarita Moyano, this dimension is explored in the small GROUPS OF SEVEN. These questions could well be taken up during the coming months by those who were unable to attend meetings in Taizé.

« *What is my attitude toward everyday life ? Do I merely put up with it, because there is no other way, or do I deliberately assume it by choice ? How can I find within me a driving force that will be —even when things are bad — like a springboard for celebrating human existence ? How can I find a festival within me ? Not just any kind of festival, an escape-hatch or a euphoria, but a festival that will be a source of dynamism in the struggle of life.*

» *There is no doubt that it is far easier to draw up a list of the oppressions that I myself suffer than of those that I impose on others. But let us be honest. Each one of us is both victim and oppressor. So what are these oppressions ? Interior oppressions : prejudice, selfishness, fear. Exterior oppressions : propaganda and publicity, the relations of exploitation and coercion of systems that tend*

to enslave man rather than bring him to maturity. This exists at every level : between continents and peoples, as well as in family life, in working conditions and in university, as well as in trade unions and the political parties. So the question is how I can find within me a festival that be source of struggle for mankind ? »

(Margarita)

HERE ARE ONE OR TWO REPLIES :

This is our first visit to Taizé and we had never heard about the festival before. Our aim has been to discover what this word implies. The festival appears to be the hinge on which everything turns. For some people it is a way, the source that gives dynamism to a struggle. For others, it is the outcome of a struggle.

For me, living the festival is to become like a « reception tent » : one can come in and out, rest and be refreshed, at all times of the day, in no way being considered an opponent.

In our professional commitments, we are searching to reconcile or to dissociate two distinct tendencies. On the one hand, a need for security and stability that makes us tend toward privileged professions among the well-to-do. On the other, a need for gratuitousness and for sharing with those who are least well-off in society.

The festival is to be found in the handicap that every man bears within him : difficulties of expressing himself, of attention, fear, limitations of every kind. This creates a zone of vulnerability that favors festivity and exchange of every kind.

Finding festival in simple things, in things whose significance is gratis. The element of gratuitousness is an essential characteristic of festivity. If is quite contrary to the give and take of « normal relations » that are on the level of business deals.

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« *When you were speaking about the festival, you said that it was a collective struggle, situated at every level of life. How can we end our complicity in all that tends to domesticate man rather than make him more free and lucid? How can we change working conditions, educational and political systems, the situation of those on the fringes of society? It is together that we must bring to light and analyse these situations. It is together that we can break with everything that enslaves us : profit at others' expense, career-ism, success at any price. It is together that we can break with relations of domination (being prepared to die as groups, as sectors, as rich and self-sufficient peoples).*

» *So we are going to ask ourselves : "how can we go right to the end in this struggle : how can we give our very life?" "Giving" ; that means refusing to waste it, or to let it be wrested away from us. Giving "the whole of our life, throughout our entire existence" ; that involves our choice of job, the exercise of a profession, commitment. "Going right to the end" ; that means dying to self, to one's privileges, to self-centred ambition, so as to be reborn to a new relationship of love that is real, of justice, of brotherhood that is true. For the Christian, this is the paschal adventure of death and resurrection accomplished once and for all by Christ. This transition, from death to life, is what he wants to operate in us, in the innermost heart of man, redeeming man's life from the absurd. Is not this "his festival" that he comes to celebrate within us?* »

(Margarita)

Several replies :

While it is highly important that one's personal and professional commitments be carefully prepared and thought out, such preparation must not become a pretext for putting things off indefinitely. We tend to say too often that we will become involved in changing society « tomorrow », once we are in a position to do so. The only thing is that when we finally reach that position, we find we are even farther compromised and unable to participate in change.

One major form of oppression is silence about situations of injustice. Another, a culture that does not liberate. Or, fear and hatred of others. Dependance under all its forms. The non-creativity of society. In face of all this : liberation that is personal and collective. Criticism that is continuous and is allied with self-criticism. Being informed about what is going on. Setting up cells as support groups. Prayer and meditation on the Gospel.

I think that communities are visible signs of a change that has already taken place, for, there, relationships are modified ; they are no longer based on selfishness. I feel that community is the strongest alternative to the present system.

« I am both oppressor and oppressed ». This ambivalence keeps cropping up. There is the example of the man who works on an assembly line. The output laid down is 100. Then somebody on the line reaches an output of 120 and this figure becomes the minimum standard for everybody. From being among the oppressed, this man becomes the oppressor of his work-mates.

Giving up following the criteria that everybody else is following when these criteria are merely success symbols. Accepting the fact that my projects have not worked out, following paths that I did not want to take.

The searching undertaken in the TENT-WORKSHOPS could also be usefully taken up and continued through the coming months. Here are summaries of what went on in some of them :

PRAYER : « *What is prayer? How can one pray?* » Everyone feels so poor in material to offer! When requests are made for formulas, nobody dares give an answer. The discussion takes the form of sharing of experiences and of what people are looking for. If prayer is like a path between God and man, why is it so difficult? The reply to this question is found in yet another question : « *and you, whom do you say that I am?* » The fact is that it is each person's faith that is in question and each person knows just how difficult it is for him to believe.

The initial question is concerned with the difficulties of prayer :

Crisis of formulation. Ancient forms are rejected, but replacements have not yet been found.

The absence of tangible response, of efficient results. How can we learn that prayer is of the realm of love, that is to say, gratuitousness.

The question of commitment in the service of mankind. Many reject a form of prayer that is not rooted in life, and which they describe as escapism : « *We want to live with the whole of our being and to be in communion with the world.* » This leads to discussion of the use of the body in worship.

Working in this way brings to light the fact that these difficulties exist for everyone. In prayer, there are no privileges. The awareness of a common ground of poverty is such a relief! So everybody starts to pluck up courage to speak : « *Prayer is a kind of waiting or expecting that is nourished by the Gospel, by Christ, by the eucharist, by praying with others.* » Discovering that the nothingness sometimes felt in prayer does not mean failure but bears witness to a presence that is « wholly other ». « *Lord, you search me and know me. Go into your room and shut the door. Stop so as to be able to listen. He is praying within us.* »

In the tent on SEARCH INTO POLITICS, Dom Luis reported on reflexions made by young South Americans :

« Being a militant is no comfortable thing. The official Church cannot get round to having confidence in us. The right wing looks on us as communists. Left wing movements suspect us of compromise with the existing order...

» We observe that christians do not have an education in faith which permits them to confront a political struggle with assurance.

» In success, as in the initial failures, political action leads to a purification of faith ; and vice versa : a faith that is authentic purifies political action.

» The fact of closing oneself to another (which means sin) is not merely a personal question. It is also a question of structures : there are structures which hinder man from communicating with others.

» In order to be an efficient form of love, politics must be truly "political". That means it must obey serious scientific and strategic criteria. Otherwise it degenerates into emotion and sentiments. Hatred, for example, is anti-political. just like fanaticism.

» Personal experience of Christ leads us to the profound meaning of the liberation of men.

» Our faith relativises our political commitment, while making it possible for us to hope that it will be efficient within the process of salvation. This does not stop us from recognising in ourselves — without naiveté — the ambiguous nature of this commitment and its intrinsic risks. »

STRUGGLE AND RECONCILIATION : What kind of struggle are we talking about ? A struggle that is personal and structural, with a view to greater justice, for the creation of a communion and a fraternity among all men. The difficulties are enormous : between the extremes of indifference and social and political conformity,

are selfishness and the pressures of the systems : « *We are being domesticated and our capacity to react and struggle blunted.* »

What does having a « heart that is reconciled » mean ? A heart that is unified, though always in tension, unified through Jesus Christ. « *Succeeding in overcoming my internal contradictions and accepting myself as I am, with a certain benevolence and humor. Reaching a point of coherence between what I believe and what I live.* » To reach this, there is another who is present, who interpellates and calls in question. God liberates through forgiveness. Being reconciled with oneself or with others does not mean to act as if nothing had happened, but to take account of the situation so as to go beyond it and search for a new type of relationship and of love.

How to live this paradox : « struggle with a heart that is reconciled » ? Every struggle is violent, struggle implies constraint. Means and attitudes are conditioned by the goal. The goal here is not the struggle itself, but a fraternal communion. The whole question is therefore one of how not to destroy persons. There exists a certain « violence of the peacemaker », but this can only be effective when it is a reality for a large number of people at the same time.

MEETINGS IN TAIZÉ

International meetings continue to be held every week, as through the holiday months, notably, there will be a big meeting at All Saints. The next big rendez-vous :

Christmas vacation

Write beforehand to let us know that you are coming !

Summer 1972

Numerous requests have already come in, asking for information about next summer. Meetings will be held weekly, monday through sunday morning, throughout the summer months. Based on this year's experience of the « english-speaking week », several such weeks, in which English is used as the major language, could be a possibility for next year.

A Letter from Mrs. Gandhi

In a reply to a letter by the Prior of Taizé, asking how young people could bring help to her country, the Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Gandhi, wrote :

New Delhi, October 6, 1971

Dear Brother Roger,

(...)

India is indeed confronted by a problem of unprecedented magnitude. After some years of great hardship due to the fighting on our borders and a prolonged and unprecedented drought, we had at last managed to reach a point from which rapid economic progress was possible and indeed we were poised and ready for it. It is ironic that only a week after the people of India had given our programme such overwhelming support, an entirely unexpected burden has fallen on us. The financial aspect of looking after such a vast number of refugees is well-nigh intolerable. But perhaps even worse are the social tensions and the political and security problems which the situation in our eastern border has created.

(...)

It is good of you to offer to send some volunteers to work in the refugee camps. However, I feel they can make a more important contribution by mobilising public opinion in their own countries. Looking after foreign workers adds to our already great administrative problems, which the language barrier would aggravate still further.

I hope it will be possible to meet you in Paris.

(...)

Indira Gandhi

Joy — Simplicity — Mercy

Questions are coming in on how to go farther in the interior adventure and how to go about finding a life style. People sometimes ask what content should be given to the sharing in the cell-groups. Here is an example of questions that might be taken up through the coming months. They are based on three key words of the Gospel that sum up the spirit of the Beatitudes.

JOY

In daily living, what fills me with joy ?

What for me forms obstacles to joy ?

With the crosses that have to be taken up each morning, how can I live and express in daily life the festival of the Risen Christ ?

SIMPLICITY

In what things am I being called personally to a simplification of my daily existence ?

How to rediscover simplicity in relationships with others ? How to find a new way of looking at these relationships ? How to combine spontaneity with discretion in meetings with others ?

If the call to simplicity is first of all inward, what consequences can this have for a life style of material poverty ?

MERCY

How to live reconciliation unto seventy times seven, forgiving and asking forgiveness ?

How to be attentive to those around me ? How to be accessible to everyone, available, easy to approach ? How to lower our own defenses and resistance ?

What are the means for changing over-sensitiveness to mercy, lack of communication to transparency ?

What does love for the Church signify for me ?

Dir., Réd., Adm. Communauté de Taizé — D.L. : n° 337 — 4e tr. 1971

« How to follow up the search process once the meeting at Taizé is over ?» Br. Roger often replies :

« It is not possible to grasp the Gospel in its entirety. But if, during your stay here, you have understood one single word, one single gesture, however small it may be, then live that word, that gesture, straight away and as intensely as you can. Once the first step has been made, this is what will open the way to the steps that follow.

» To live the little that we have understood ; using that minute intuition as a creative starting point is already a great deal. That means never giving up the struggle : struggle to find an intuition, and to live from it, the struggle to watch and pray with Christ. In the struggle of his agony in Gethsemane, Christ found his disciples asleep and said to them : « So, you could not watch with me one hour ? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. » For ourselves, when we are unable to pray, at least let us watch, holding ourselves present, in silence.

» Once you have found an intuition, do not monopolise it for yourself. When we try too hard to store up the good grain within us, it ends up by going bad. Search for means of communicating it. While not forgetting the hidden nature of the preparation for the Council of Youth, how can you communicate a word, a gesture, there where you are, at work, at school, in a café, in church ?

» Do not try to live the intuition which you have perhaps found here in exactly the same way as in Taizé. If you do, you will be in danger of caricaturing it. Try, rather, to be creative from your own starting point : the starting point of the poverty that exists in each one of us. Taizé is only he name of one small family. It is better not to use the name of Taizé too much. Of course one cannot be completely silent about the name of a family which perhaps you love. That would be inhuman. But talk about it as little as possible. Speak rather about the content, about the news proclaimed and lived through the Council of Youth that is in preparation. »